**CONTENTS**

A Note on Dray Prescot  
Chapter one  
Chapter two  
Chapter three  
Chapter four  
Chapter five  
Chapter six  
Chapter seven  
Chapter eight  
Chapter nine  
Chapter ten  
Chapter eleven  
Chapter twelve  
Chapter thirteen  
Chapter fourteen  
Chapter fifteen  
Chapter sixteen  
Chapter seventeen  
Chapter eighteen  
Chapter nineteen  
Chapter twenty  
Chapter twenty-one  
Chapter twenty-two  

A Glossary to the Spectre Cycle  
About the author  
The Dray Prescot Series
A NOTE ON DRAY PRESCOT

The undead monster called the Spectre has been destroyed. Princess Didi’s fine new city of Gafarden no longer suffers under the threat of the animated corpse. Didi herself lies seriously injured in Zandikar in the Eye of the World, lovingly tended by her cousin, Princess Velia. Ulana Farlan, the governor of Didi’s province of Urn Vennar, has been removed from office. Now the rogue and schemer Nath Swantram, Nath the Clis, rules.

Prescot is a man above middle height with immensely broad shoulders, who moves like a hunting cat, silent and lethal. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage. Educated in the harsh conditions of Nelson’s Navy he gained the quarterdeck; but only when he arrived on the exotic world of Kregen under Antares could his true qualities find expression.

The mysterious Star Lords need him to further their obscure plans. Pushed into trying to unite all the continents and islands of Paz by the Star Lords, Prescot recognizes the enormity of the task.

Believing the Spectre destroyed by hundreds of arrows, Prescot returns to his home of Esser Rarioch in Valka to be with the divine Delia.

Some parts of this story give details that Prescot could not have known until later. They are inserted where they aid clarity. Due to this logical presentation, we know what Prescot does not.
We know the Spectre, dead and animate, is about to terrorize Gafarden again as Tralgan Vorner, the wronged Elten of Culvensax, seeks vengeance on those who betrayed him. Within Vorner the Spectre lives.

So join Dray Prescot as he attempts to learn a new skill, there on the high balcony of Esser Rarioch, under the streaming mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio.

Alan Burt Akers
CHAPTER ONE

Delia said: “You put one needle like this, the other needle thus and place the wool just so. Then turn—oh, no!”

Like a slippery eel a needle fell from my fumbling fingers and tinkled on the marble floor of the high balcony.

“You fambly, Dray Prescot.” She reached down in a flowing motion of pure beauty and caught the needle up in her slender fingers that could wield a sword with the strength of steel. “Try again. Like this.”

“Yes, my heart,” I said—very meekly.

Once again the wool curled like a tentacle of a monster of myth and the needles went every which way. “Sink me!” I burst out. “I’ll not be beat by confounded knitting!”

“And quite right, too,” said Inch, all the seven feet length of him lounging out onto the balcony. “Anyway, I thought you could knit. Sasha taught me ages ago.”

From up here on this secluded balcony of the castle palace of Esser Rarioch all the splendid panorama of the City and Bay of Valkanium lay spread out beneath us. The early morning shimmered with the promise of a wonderful day. A light perfumed zephyr stole among the brilliance of the flowers bowering this niche of beauty. This, indeed, was what it was to feel young and alive on Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio!
Well, of course, I should have known better. The world of Kregen is undeniably supremely beautiful. It is also dark and terrible and menace forever lurks not far away.

Inch sat himself down in his fashion of curling those long legs away neatly. He wore a brass chain about his neck with a simply enormous padlock dangling on his morning tunic. The end of the chain vanished into the doorway—and here came Sasha, laughing, holding the brass links like a dog’s lead.

“And dear Inch made a fist of it at first, Dray—so do not despair.” She shook the chain gently so that it chingled.

Neither Delia nor myself questioned the meaning of the padlocked chain. Inch was from Ng’groga where life was dominated by Taboos. He’d broken a Taboo and was now doing penance. At least he’d not been at the squish pie, which he loved inordinately, for then he’d be standing on his head.

“True,” said Inch, equably. “What I wanted was—well, now that disgusting Spectre has been destroyed we have more problems.”

“Surprise me.”

“There are rumors up north of restlessness. The racters—”

“What!” said Delia, sitting up. “They conspired against my father. He was murdered. They disappeared. Don’t say—” She did not go on. Once the most powerful political party in Vallia, the racters had vanished as a cohesive force. Totally committed to gaining their selfish ends by whatever means they could, they had sought to rule all Vallia. Rich and powerful, they had at last been overcome during the Time of Troubles. Now Vallia was liberated and the emperor Drak and the empress Silda ran the country with benign hands.
I stood up and walked to the carved marble balustrade. If true, this news was bad—very bad. There was no doubt in my mind that my lad Drak was the best for Vallia. I had to believe he would handle this crisis—if it came to that—with his usual tact and firmness.

Speaking carefully, Inch went on: “There have been meetings. Mercenaries are being recruited. It is said, and it seems likely, this is the work of the grandchildren of those racters we defeated.”

The perfume of the flowers wafted sweetly all about and a little brown scorpion waddled along the balustrade towards me. “Dray Prescot!” The scorpion’s voice sounded harshly metallic.

Neither Inch nor Sasha could see or hear the scorpion. I spoke to the thing and I knew they could not hear me either. “Not now!”

“Onker! Look up!”

A sensation as of an agonizing groan shocked right through me. “Not now!” I said; but I looked up.

Oh, yes, there he was, planing in tight circles above with the twin sunslight striking in gold and scarlet glory from his feathers.

One black beady eye cocked a look of great calculation as he swung about above us. Delia did not gasp. She took my arm in that firm powerful grasp and I put my hand over hers. So, together, we looked up and waited for whatever of misfortune the Gdoineye would bring.

The squawk racketed down like the rip of a rusty saw. “Dray Prescot! Onker! Emperor of Onkers!”

My free hand curled into a fist and tightened around the hilt of the rapier buckled up over the morning lounging robe.
As you know, Kregans on most occasions of social life find it prudent to carry a weapon or two—preferably three or four. I’d contented myself with a rapier and left-hand dagger. Plus, of course, my old sailor knife snugged over my right hip. The rapier hilt bit into my skin, so fierce the desperation filling me.

“You failed to complete your assigned task in the Dawn Lands.”

Was there a squawking note of petty triumph in the Gdoiney’s words? Mayhap. I did not think so. He was the spy and messenger for the Star Lords and performed his duties to his own obscure satisfaction. Now he planed about with the Suns of Scorpio striking refugently from his plumage. “The duty is urgent, onker. Urgent.”

Delia looked about, expecting to see the Gdoineya, the twin sister, which called her for missions for the Everoinye. Only the single great raptor sailed against the blue brightness of the day.

“When,” called up my Delia in the sweetest voice in two worlds, “when, oh great boaster, is it never most urgent?”

“Ha!” I exclaimed, both vastly amused and proud of Delia, Delia of the Blue Mountains, Delia of Delphond.

The Gdoineye swirled lower, flirting a wing as he banked in the turn. “You have the right of it, my lady. With the Everoinye it is always most urgent.” His tones did not racket down in a raucous squawk. Rather, they sounded downright respectful. Marvel of marvels! But then, naturally, even so supernatural a fellow as this fell under the spell of Delia’s poise and charm—and shrewdness, not to say downright cunning. “My lady, I bid you remberee.” This astonished me even more. Then, in the old intemperate screech: “Be about your business, emperor of onkers, so that the Everoinye may shed their light upon you.”
With that the Gdoinye winged up and away and the world filled with the pulsating blue light of the Giant Scorpion.

There was just time for me to cry out: “Delia! My heart!”
There was just time for Delia to call: “I know! My love—”
Then the sundering wash of blue radiance tore us apart.

What a tempestuous and frustrating life I led on Kregen! The damn Star Lords kept on hurling me away from all I held dear, tearing out the very roots of my being. There was no redress. No, by the disgusting diseased liver and lights of Makki Grodno! Because I possessed the yrium, that marvelous and wonderful and hateful super-charisma, the Everoinye had chosen me to be their instrument in bringing all the islands and continents of Paz together to resist the Shanks who raided from around the curve of the world.

So be it. I’d do the dirty work at the speed of light, then hightail it back to all I wanted on Kregen or Earth.

The monstrous shape of the Scorpion formed and bore me away. That dratted Phantom Giant Blue Scorpion of the Star Lords whisked me aloft into winds and bluster. The Everoinye were adept at fashioning concealments for my sudden departures as I knew from conversations with those who’d been around when I’d gone—ha! Gone! Ripped away, more like. My slippered feet hit a soft mass and I sank down thigh-deep into clinging snow.

The first thing I noticed was—it was cold! Cuttingly cold.

The next item to take my attention—and this despite Zim and Genodras shining away up there in full daylight—was a shimmering vibration in the air and a trembling vibration through the snow. A noise like a million leems coughing rumbled through the frigid air.
A voice cut like the very chill all around: “Dray Prescot!”

Turning at once I stared up slope. The mingled red and green beams of sunslight streaked the whiteness of the snow. Tiny shards of glitter spiked up from the surface. Upslope a handsome wooden chalet promised refuge from the bitterness all about. My morning robe did nothing to keep me warm.

“Dray Prescot!” The voice rose, hectoring. “Come on! Hurry!”

“I’m hurrying, confound you, Otto the Lance!”

He looked just the same as the last time I’d seen him. He wore his black leathers over a mail shirt and was girded with weapons. Oh, and, of course, seeing he was a darling of the Star Lords, he had a voluminous ponsho fleece wrapped about him. His remarkable hat, very tall-crowned, still sported its aigrette of faerling feathers.

“I’ve told you not to call me Otto. At the moment I’m using the name Starson.” His bright angular face with that black bar of a moustache looked to be more worried than he’d admit to. He swung an arm up, pointing back. “Can’t you see!”

All this had taken but a few moments. I could see all right. Up there it looked as though the whole world was falling on us in a smothering welter of snow. The noise boomed on and on, louder and louder. White billows rolled and gushed and tumbled remorselessly down.

Avalanche!

The neat chalet stood directly in the path of the roaring tide and would be swept away headlong.

As Otto—or Starson—said, there was little time. We must hurry.

The snow churned away around my legs. The damned stuff impeded the slightest movement. Plunging up and down I
ploughed my way up. “And if you’re Starson now, well, I’m still Jak.”

Just before he turned around to fight his way up through the snow, he called: “Aye! Jak the Sudden.”

Steam gushed from our mouths and nostrils. The awe-inspiring sight of the avalanche spurred us on. The thing would engulf the chalet and tear it to pieces and scatter the bits all the way down the mountainside.

No need to ask why we two kregoinyi had been catapulted here by the Star Lords. Someone crouched shivering in the chalet with the thunder of approaching doom in their ears. Probably they were far too frightened to think of running out and trying to escape. As we neared the wooden building I began to think we’d be swept away, too.

“Hurry, man, hurry!” His harsh voice rasped as the steam plumed from his mouth.

Saving my breath for fighting through the snow I quickened my pace. Stubbornness and silly puffed-up pride made me forge on and overtake this Otto, self-styled Starson. He favored me with a bitter glance as I went by so that, although I didn’t smile, I gleed a trifle. In addition, I plead in mitigation of my childish behavior two points. One, we were in a hurry and the quicker I got there the better. And, second, I said absolutely nothing in the way of suggesting he follow his own precept of urgency.

The roaring snow monster bore down on us, closer and closer.

The damned white clinging stuff clung all right. I’ve never liked snow. Never have. As I trudged on, every step a battle to lift the leg and thrust it forward and so down and the next leg up and down, I came across a deep rutted line carved into the
snow, curving away to the left. There were two lines in parallel and the crystal glitter in the runnels showed they’d been made recently.

Whether or not I felt any sensation in my feet when I stamped them on the wooden steps of the porch I cannot say. Just thankful to be out of the damned snow I bashed the double doors open and plunged on through. A comfortable residence for a mountain retreat, the place spoke eloquently of money. The furnishings all were of good taste. That, at the moment, was a matter of supreme indifference to me.

“Where are you?” I bellowed. “Come on. Hurry!”

Starson bundled up at my back, yelling: “Kov! Kov!”

He pushed past, for I’d halted as my gaze fell on the coat rack by the door. The row of pegs supported a single ponsho fleece garment. On the floor below stood a single pair of bulky felt boots.

Racegoers speak with awe of the fabled zorca Fleet-hooves. He won every race in which he was entered. He led from the starting post to the finish. Famous and fabled though he was, he’d been dead these past two centuries—his name lived on.

If Fleet-hooves had started with me as we raced for the ponsho fleece and the boots, I’d have been wearing them whilst he was still thinking about lifting those fabled hooves on the start line.

Starson went yelling about the chalet and the onrushing rumble of the avalanche battered at our senses, battling with his shouts.

He came bursting in from the inner door waving his arms. “There’s no one here!”

“Then let us depart.”
The noise rolled unbearably upon us. The floor shook. The far wall broke inwards in a smothering welter of snow. The whole chalet lifted and tilted. We were thrown toppling sideways as the chalet about us flew to flinders. Everything turned white and then black.

The avalanche bore everything away to oblivion.
CHAPTER TWO

Snow clogging my mouth. Snow blocking my ears. Snow blinding me.

Over and over I went, smothered, feeling the frightening power of the avalanche. Down the slope we hurtled, bits of wood flailing about in the white smother. With a ferocious sweep I cleared my eyes—but blackness persisted as the snow pressed in.

Gasping for air, wallowing about like a fish on land, I caught the abrupt pallor of blueness. A blue radiance glowed into life. Within that globe of light the figure of Starson, upside down, became visible.

The Star Lords were calling their kregoinye back! Starson was being rescued. Mentioning Makki Grodno to myself I made a muscle-cracking effort to stabilize my avalanche-driven antics. The blue globe began to move—began to move away from me!

Somehow I flung myself forward within the encompassing snow. A desperate lunge, a frantic grab, and I gripped Starson’s ankle.

Gasping for breath proved a mistake as a slogging great slurp of snow slammed into my mouth. I spat, infuriated by that unwelcome ice cold intrusion but mostly by the callous way the Star Lords appeared prepared to abandon me to a frozen fate.

After all, they wanted me to run about Kregen pulling their chestnuts out of the fire. And, too, they required me to unite all
the continents and islands of Paz to resist the Shanks who came reiving in fire and blood from over the curve of the world. To do that the Everoinye fancied I could make myself this confounded Emperor of Emperors, the Emperor of All Paz. Yet they’d not deigned to haul me out of this blasted avalanche as they pulled out their pet kregoinye, Starson.

Tumbling head over heels but with my fist firmly wrapped about Starson’s ankle, I felt myself being dragged along like an ice breaker.

The speed of the Scorpion’s transit exploded, as they say in Clishdrin, with force enough to rattle my back teeth.

In the next heartbeat blueness enveloped everything. The damned suffocating snow evaporated, the blackness swamped with blue, and I went hurtling headlong into an azure phantasmagoria.

I blinked. It was still cold. Snow. The dreadful white clinging muck existed everywhere about me. I was still on that Opaz-forsaken hillside smothered in snow. European languages on Earth have just the one word for snow. Eskimos have well over a hundred words for snow, describing the different kinds they contend with.

Well, bully for them. Sitting up, I clenched the ponsho fleece tightly about me. At least, the Star Lords had allowed me to retain that. My fist still gripped about Starson’s ankle. I truly believe his ankle bones would have broken through before I’d have relinquished my grasp. With a welter of white he struggled up and yelled: “Jak! You idiot! Leggo!”

Spitting out an Eskimo description I said: “Blasted Star Lords! They’re a definite danger to my health.”
Upslope the wooden chalet stood undamaged, bright against the white glare. Beyond and further up the mountainside the first ruffles and spumings of white froth betokened the avalanche preparing to descend in all its awful majesty upon us.

“The stupid Everoiny!” I yelped, mightily incensed. “They’ve messed it up again!”

“Jak!” Starson sounded frightfully upset—ha! frightfully!

Let him worry about the Star Lords. All my fanciful thoughts that we’d come to a better understanding seemed to me in that freezing moment to be a mere figment of my imagination. Did the Star Lords truly require me to be the Emperor of All Paz? As you will be well aware, I didn’t give a damn either way. All I wanted was to be back in Esser Rarioch with Delia. Still, when all was said and done, there was merit in uniting the lands of Paz to resist the Shanks. Then, it followed, why did it have to be me, plain Dray Prescott, to be the simple tool used by the superhuman Star Lords? Because I had the yrium? Of course!

The avalanche over our heads rumbled with menacing power. The wind cut. The cold cut. The damned unfairness of fate cut. I shouted: “Starson! Get your fat carcass up to the chalet! There are people to be rescued.”

“You! You!” he gargled, blowing snow every which way. “I know! I’m in command here and don’t you forget it.”

Once again we toiled up to effect the gallant rescue. I was not so much light-headed as feeling insubstantial, as though in all this fiasco, and knowing it to be real, I acted in some fantastic play.

There were no double lines cut into the snow. Under the overhang of the eaves stood a family-sized sled piled with furs.
At least, by Vox, it was nice to know what we were going to do since we’d already done it.

This time I allowed Starson to precede me. Inside the chalet the warmth closed in more strongly than before. The smell of cooking lingered in the air. Starson bellowed: “Kov! Kov!”

Why was I not in the slightest surprised when the four numims appeared? We’d rescued this little noble family before, Starson and I, when he’d been calling himself Surrey. Logic followed that we were in the independent kovnate of Larnydria. Kov Randalt looked thinner than when I’d last seen him, and his powerful lion-man’s face looked more shrunken than I cared for. The Kovneva Esme lay supine in a narrow carrying cot. The dread disease chivrel from which she suffered, apart from turning her hair white, weakened her daily. The two children appeared to me to be bearing up well. Lion folk, numims, are a proud and hardy race of diffs upon Kregen.

Their wonderment at seeing we two fellows again was dealt with swiftly and ruthlessly by Starson. In no time at all they were wrapped in ponsho fleeces taken from the row of pegs by the door. Now, all the pegs were empty and all the boots were gone.

As we went out I realized the ominous noise of the avalanche had become a mere part of our surroundings. The dull sky revealed not a single beam of light from Zim and Genodras. Gloom pervaded the mountainside. I tell you, that was a sad place.

My new comrade and I lifted the kovneva aboard, the children were snugged down safely, the kov instructed to climb on so that we two kregoinyi could push the sled out onto the beginning of the slide.
With quick thoughts for Zair and Opaz, I thrust hard and then swung about ready to jump aboard.

Starson slipped. His left hand grasped the rail of the sled. His body twisted as the sled began to move. In moments he’d either be dragged along helplessly—or he’d let go and be stranded.

Now, as he hadn’t been about when the Everoinye first dropped us down at the wrong time, he must have scrambled aboard. I leaned over, got a grip on his wrist, snapped out: “Jump!” and hauled.

He came inboard like the proverbial sack of potatoes and landed all in a heap alongside the kov. He spluttered. Then—we were off.

Away we went, hammering down in a welter of whiteness sprouting in a huge feathering wave on each side. Up and down went the sled, roaring on in a spuming avalanche of our own. The real avalanche coruscated in a foam of whiteness, chasing us.

Which would be the swifter? Our sled—or the dread half-mountainside falling upon us?

All I could do was hang on and hope.

As you know, I am inordinately fond of the waltz music of the Strausses. However, as we went thundering down that mountain, the pulsating rhythms of the Thunder and Lightning Polka drummed into my brain. It seemed to me that thunder broke crashingly about my ears, and lightning bolts sizzled past my head. What a ride that was!

On we foamed, roaring across the damned snow, hurtling down the hill. The children huddled together, and the kov pulled his ponsho fleece about them. The poor old kovneva, terminally
in decline from the remorseless ravages of the chivrel, just lay there, a supine lump.

Don’t ask me how long that headlong descent lasted. As we plummeted down it seemed to me that time stood still and we went on and on for an eternity. We spewed out as the slope lessened and pine trees passed in a blur, slewing around so that we nearly toppled over. When we finally came to rest it seemed to me we’d only just started, and the mad rush down had taken only seconds.


Through the shadowy aisles of the pines lights bloomed ahead, some four hundred or so paces off. Kov Randalt heaved up.

“Where there are lights there is warmth!” Then he checked himself abruptly. I had the wry thought that lights did not necessarily indicate warmth. That was not the thought that halted the kov. He stared at Starson, and, speaking slowly and with vehemence, said: “We are not among friends here.”

The last time we’d encountered this proud but shattered numim, we’d had to run off before a mob out for his blood strung him up. We’d had the assistance of the savapim Tyr Hangrol ti Ferstheim then. When Kov Randalt went on to spell out the situation, saying that all his retainers and servants had deserted him and that he and his family had hidden in the remote chalet right on the borders of the country, I knew for certain the Savanti would not send a savapim to assist us.

We were still in Larnydria. Over the mountains the neighboring kingdom of Enterdrin had the usual relationship of countries in the Dawn Lands—that was, they were usually at
war. If, the kov said, we could cross Enterdrin then the next nation, the numim-ruled Felandia, would offer refuge. So—that was the task the Everoinye now set to our hands.

Now when a fellow takes up the adventuring business he has to endure cold and heat, rain and snow, success and misfortune falling impartially upon him from the heavens. By this time I had to acknowledge to myself that I was uncomfortably cold. The others were in better case for they hadn’t waded through snow in a morning robe and slippers.

I said: “I will go and scout out the lights.”

Starson started to say something in a hard voice, stopped, said: “Very well. Go.”

Immediately, in the next heartbeat, he turned to the sled and spoke to the kov, making sure he and Esme and the children were all right. I did not smile to myself; I just hitched up my sword belts and set off.

The lights turned out to be illuminated windows from a small huddle of cabins, throwing oblongs of yellow radiance across the snow. The pines stood all about, somber and, in that setting, ominous. The folk were probably eking out an existence as fur trappers, I knew very well that, by Krun, I would not want to live here.

That thought, whilst as ever on Kregen remaining watchfully alert, made me believe they’d be friendly enough. Just in case I checked the rapier and main gauche ready for quick draws—just, you understand, to be on the safe side.

My first couple of bangs on the nearest door evoked no response.

I banged harder.
The door opened slowly and a gust of warm and pungent air wafted about me. Lamplight shone from within, turning the fellow in the doorway into a black silhouette.

“Who is it?”

His voice, hoarse, held a quavering note. “A fellow who’s stranded in this confounded snow,” I said. I spoke up so he could hear me, at the same time I put a down-drooping fall to the words so he’d grasp the idea I was really in need of assistance. Well, by the Black Chunkrah! I truly was!

A woman’s voice called from inside the cabin. So, swiftly, I said: “I mean you no harm. My friends and I just need rest and some warmth. We are frozen.”

For a space the moment hung. Then the door was pushed wider and I stepped through. The warmth was most welcome, most welcome indeed!

The place was simply furnished and yet snug. The lamp was a cheap mineral oil affair; but the fire’s bright blaze seemed to me to be decidedly what was required. “Llahal,” I said. “My name is Jak. I must go and fetch my friends—and I thank you most graciously.” Although the sentiment was what I intended, the words somehow didn’t quite match that intent.

The Opaz-forsaken cold must be addling my brains.

The smell from the stew pot hanging above the fire reminded me that my inward parts were muchly in need of sustenance. I just hoped Starson or the kov had some money, for I had none. That made me realize I mustn’t tarry, so, repeating my thanks, I said I’d go now and fetch the rest of the party. I mentioned there were two children. This was not only cunning on my part but a trifle despicable, for the woman gave a little sympathetic
cry. The couple were Fristles and their cat-faces expressed what I took to be genuine concern.

As I have said before, not everyone living on Kregen is a mighty warrior or an unhanged villain. The ordinary folk make that fabulous world all the better for their presence.

The trudge back through the snow found me in better spirits. We’d get ourselves warm, eat and drink, and then plan our next moves.

A fleeting dark shape under the trees swooped over my head and came to rest on a branch a few paces off. Cruel curved talons bit into the bark. The arrogant head tilted to one side. His plumage shadowed without its usual bright sheen in that miserable gloom. In the next second his wings unfolded and flapped and he soared up and away and very quickly was lost to sight.

“Now what the blazes,” I said to myself, “did that bird of ill omen want?”

Pushing the Gdoinye out of my mind I stepped out stoutly.

A surprise awaited me back at the sled. Well, of course, on Kregen you expect surprises every day and twice on weekends.

The trim shape of a flier rested by the sled. The relief I felt almost overwhelmed me. This explained the Gdoinye’s rapid visit. The Star Lords provided for one of their favorites so now we could fly the kov and his family clear across Enterdrin and deliver them safely to their friends in Felandia.

Ha! The Gdoinye kept on calling Dray Prescot an onker, and here, once again, Dray Prescot obliged by confirming that observation’s truth.

Starson was busily assisting the children to board the voller and I was pleased to see that both of them observed the fantam-yrrh. Kovneva Esme was already snuggled down in her ponsho
fleece. Kov Randalt, looking up, saw me trudging along towards them, and pointed. Starson swung about. Another man’s head lifted up above the gunwale.

That head was crowned by a very wide-brimmed hat festooned with faerling feathers, quite unlike Starson’s monstrosity of a hat.

Nimbly, this fellow, the pilot of the voller, jumped down. He wore a magnificent coat of russet furs. I knew the clothes under that desirable garment. There would be the gallant doublet and the flaring breeches and the torrents of fine white lace at his throat.

He said: “Lahal, Nath the Hammer.” His lean, bronzed face with the crystal-blue eyes, the wide curled moustaches, the small pointed beard, looked just as dashingly handsome.

“Lahal, Larghos de la France.”

Here was another kregoinye most highly favored by the Star Lords. Whatever function Kov Randalt and his family were destined to perform in the devious schemes of the Everoinye, they were certainly receiving right royal treatment.

A distant rumbling through the air and a beginning vibration under our feet told most eloquently that the avalanche had not finished with us. I just hoped the rotten thing would stop before reaching the cabins.

“We must hurry.” Starson climbed aboard. “Come on, Larghos.”

“I am with you, mon ami. Parbleu! This is no place for a civilized man!” With that the gallant dandy leaped into the voller.

Starson — Otto the Lance — looked down. “Nath the Hammer,” he said with more than a trace of sarcasm. “I sensed you were mighty cutting about changing names.”
“As to that,” I started to say, and put my hand on the coaming ready to climb aboard.

“Ah—my apologies.” Larghos de la France spoke without any trace of apology in his tone. “This is a four place airboat and we are already overloaded with the children. My regrets.”

For a moment I just stood there, hand on the coaming, feet in the damned snow.

Onker, the Gdoinye said. Well, and wasn’t he right? Here were two brave kregoinyi much favored by the Star Lords. And here was I, their handyman, their Jack of All Trades, the fellow they flung in when everything else had failed. I did not mention Makki Grodno. I did not mention the Divine Madam of Belschutz. I was past that.

Yet, as I have mentioned, I fancied I was forming a better relationship with the Star Lords. Probably the presence of these other two grandees in the Everoinye’s scheme of things made them overlook this fragile new relationship. Whatever—the outcome was the same.

They did have the grace to call down the remberees as the voller lifted off. She went up smartly, turned, and whistled off into the distance and vanished—just like the confounded Gdoinye vanished.

Darkness thickened among the trees. The cold stung. I lifted my arms and let them fall back to my sides. There was nothing new in Dray Prescot being abandoned to his own fate—was there?

Hoping that the avalanche wouldn’t reach as far as here, I swung about and set off bashing through the snow towards the cabin and the friendly Fristles.
CHAPTER THREE

Nath Redfern, known as Nath the Limp, heard the commotion from Little Lace Street as he patrolled his Watchman’s beat along Haberdasher’s Avenue. Long shadows from the rosy pinkish light of the Maiden with the Many Smiles lay across the alleys and streets of the new city of Gafarden. Nath the Limp hoisted up the lantern on its pole and hurried towards the corner. Young hellions up to no good, was his verdict on the noise, and he’d soon restore peace and quiet to the nighted city streets.

He’d picked up his injury resulting in his limp when he’d served in the Tenth Churgurs at the Battle of Bengarl’s Blight. That seemed a long time ago now. He rounded the corner to see the contorted shapes of the youngsters having fun throwing empty bottles about. Mindless young idiots, he thought, and roared out an: “Oi! You! Stay where you are.”

Of course, being hot-blooded youth in the full flower of undirected vigor, they shrieked with laughter and ran off as fleetly as palies, leaving Nath the Limp limping far astern.

The end of Little Lace Street gave onto Larming Street, which was the end of Nath’s patrol area. He fumed in frustration. A figure turned smartly into the street and a lantern atop its pole shed lemon across the cobbles. A voice lifted. “Hai! Nath! What’s all the kerfuffle?”
“Shando! Just a bunch of good-for-nothing kids having their idea of fun.”

The two Watchmen approached each other. Shando, who’d served in the Fifth Zorca Bows, and thereby considered himself a cut above a mere infantryman, even if he’d been a churgur, snorted. “Damned kids!”

“Aye. A spot of service in the army’d do ’em a power of good.”

The two veterans stood talking for a moment. The night breathed about them, the Maiden with the Many Smiles shone down her refulgent pinkish rays, and the scent of Moon Blooms wafted sweetly on the air.

They were just talking about the merciful relief everyone of Gafarden felt that the disgusting object known as the Spectre had at last been destroyed, when a series of hideous screaming screeching shrieks broke frighteningly on the still night.

Nath and Shando jumped about, and their lantern-topped poles thrust down and forward like spears. The shrieks culminated in a bubbling gurgle and died away in a long fading groan.

“By Vox!” said Shando.

“Opaz forfend!” said Nath.

Together, cautiously, they approached the shadowed alley off Larming Street from whence the awful noise originated.

Like the old swods they were they shone their lights in first. The thing that lay sprawled in black blood had once been a man. The body was unrecognizable, ripped into shreds. One arm had been thrown a dozen paces away, and a leg stuck up out of a refuse container at the side of the alley. The lights and shadows wavered eerily over that nauseous scene. The two kampeons regarded the shambles stoically.

At last, Shando said: “Best call the Deldar.”
“Aye.” Nath rubbed his nose. “I don’t like to say it; but—”
“The Opaz-forsaken creature was destroyed. It was witnessed.”
“It was. Just so. But—”
Shando shook his lantern pole. “How many arrows pierced the thing? Hundreds!”
“Even so, even so,” said Nath the Limp. “Devils are known to return—”
Shando, who was known as Shando the Fomentor, snorted. “Aye. And where is the Spectre now, hey?”

At that both old soldiers turned about, throwing the lights of their lanterns in the crannies and crevices of the alleyway. A blue glow took their immediate attention. It appeared to them to emanate past the mouth of the alleyway a little further along Larming Street. Together, cautiously, they went back to the street. The blue radiance died as they reached the street. The fuzzy pink moonlight washed in roseate shadows all about them.

A man walked towards them. He was dressed in a mangy old ponsho fleece, and his feet were thrust into bulbous felt boots.

The figure stepped into the lantern light. Nath looked intently. He stiffened to rigid attention.

“Majister!”

* * * *

In turn I looked at this crusty old kampeon, now a Watchman in the city of Gafarden. The baptism in the Sacred Pool of far Aphraśoe has blessed—or cursed?—me with an eidetic memory. So I could not of course know all the names of every swod in the Freedom Army of Vallia; those I did know I remembered.

I said: “Lahal, Nath Redfern. Well met.”
Nath Redfern said, somewhat garblingly, and not surprising in the circumstances: “This is Shando the Fomentor, majister. There is a corpse in the alley. Cut up bad.”

“Majister,” spat out Shando the Fomentor, who was not known to me but who clearly accepted what Nath said. “Majister! It is the Spectre!”

If I own to a cold breeze blowing around the back of my neck I merely acknowledge any fellow’s dread at the name of the Spectre.

“The Opaz-forsaken thing was destroyed. I was there. I saw it.” I moved forward purposefully. “Where is the corpse?”

“Down here in Fishbone Alley, majister.” With the lantern lights throwing splashes of color through the night we moved down Fishbone Alley. It was called this because at one time skilled workers who shaped and pierced fish bones to make needles lived in the alley.

A few people began to gather, alarmed at the noise. I told the two Watchmen to hold them back, and looked down on the pathetic body. This hideousness certainly looked like the work of the Spectre. But, by the pustulating proboscis and bulging belly of Makki Grodno! I’d seen the damn monster shredded by hundreds of shafts. I’d seen it melt and flow and vanish. The ghastly thing could not still be alive—could it?

We here on this Earth are only too dreadfully familiar with what are called copycat crimes. This murder could have been committed by some sick individual aping the Spectre. One precept in life is to assume the worst and hope for the best. I had to assume this was, indeed, the handiwork of the Spectre, and hope that it wasn’t.
The crowd was thickening and more lights appeared. Clouds obscured the Dahemin, the twin moons forever orbiting each other as they orbited Kregen. Returning to the mouth of Fishbone Alley I, somewhat curtly, told a likely looking fellow, a Rapa whose feathers sheened darkly in the lantern light, to run and fetch the officials of the city. Everything would have to be done following the correct procedures. Gafarden had suffered far too much from the murdering Spectre to botch any fresh investigation.

Naturally, questions were asked. The two Watchmen had seen nothing, nor had anyone else. No dark shadows running from the scene of the crime featured in this investigation. When, eventually, the body was carried away and nothing else, for the moment, remained to be done, I took myself off to the palace and the rooms there set aside for my use.

The ridiculous ponsho fleece and the felt boots had served me well in the bitter cold of the mountainside; now I needed a prolonged session in the Baths of the Nine. Then a slap-up meal would put me right with the world once more.

The friendly Fristles had indeed taken me in and so saved my bacon. I just wondered if this fresh murder here in Gafarden had not taken place, would the Star Lords have plucked me from Larnydria?

As soon as my essential inner and outer requirements had been satisfied, I set about bringing myself up to date on developments in Gafarden. Tobi Vingal came bounding into my office and the door crashed to after him. Brash and happy-go-lucky, he was a welcome sight, and his heavy features flushed with pleasure as he snapped to attention.

“Majister! I mean, jis!”
Lahal, Tobi. Sit yourself down. As you are acting as my assistant, you can tell me everything that’s going on.

The chair crunched as he sat. He made a face. “Well, now—not a lot, jis, not a lot.” He paused, scratched his nose, and added: “There was a murder last night—but I hear you were there.”

“Aye. If this is the Spectre again—well, I just don’t know.”

A small silence fell. Then Tobi went on to tell me about the doings of the various people of interest to us—all of which you will hear in due course.

For his non-alcoholic drinks Tobi was partial to colored sazz rather than parclear. The necessary orders were given and very quickly a tray was brought in bearing a jug of sazz and two glasses. Tobi poured and lifted his glass.

“Shiraz!”

He quaffed and smiled and licked his lips.

“Shiraz?” I said. “What’s that all about?”

“Why, jis. Just a toast. Something one says before drinking. It’s all the rage in Loh where I was.” He drank again, and said: “You’ve never heard that toast before?”

“Not in the parts of Loh I’ve been.”

“Well, jis, it’s a big place.”

So I just nodded and said: “Opaz Sublime,” and drank off my sazz.

Tobi went on to tell me that Jiktar Yavnin Purvun was back in Gafarden. I was surprised.

“I thought Yavnin was going to Vondium to take command of a new vessel in the Vallian Air Service?”

“That didn’t come to anything. I don’t know why. But there is a new Fleet Admiral now. Maybe—”
“New Fleet Admiral?” Vangar ti Valkanium had taken over the high command of the Air Service when the Lord Farris died. “What’s his name?” I couldn’t conceive that Drak would have dismissed Vangar.

“No idea, jis. The Presidio is different these days.”

A little shiver took me. Tobi looked up. “Jis?”

“Nothing,” I said. The disquieting news Inch had brought twined with the damned cold on that mountainside when the avalanche cascaded down like white Doomsday. Things were not right in Vallia.

Of my three new comrades, Tobi, Yavnin and Nalgre Nevko, there was no news of the latter. Tobi just said that he’d had to go to Vondium on merchant business. Well, by Krun, we’d had some right roaring times together when the Spectre roamed Gafarden. If the misbegotten thing was truly back, we were likely to experience more of the same.

Tobi confirmed that ugly rumors circulated in North Vallia. The descendents of the racters who’d been roundly defeated all those seasons ago, growing restless and feeling family pride and shame, intended, it was said, to take over. They’d finish the job their forebears had so signally failed to do.

Mind you, they were being clever in being active in the north. Lately, Drak had been away in the southwest. These neo racters would drum up support in many different quarters of Vallia, and flit from here to there like woflovols on a night of Notor Zan. If they managed to load the Presidio with their adherents, then Drak would have to act swiftly and very adroitly.

One of the under-chamberlains knocked and came in wearing an expression compounded of puzzlement and apprehension.
“Majister. The chief pallan, Nath Swantram, is demanding to see you.” The under-chamberlain, a little Och called Quarmby, hesitated. Then: “He has guards with him, in armor, bearing swords.”

In his casual, reckless way, Tobi said: “Guards usually do.” But I saw how his left hand clenched around the hilt of his sword.

“Well, Quarmby,” I said, very jovial, leaning back in the chair. “Show the chief pallan in.”

“At once, majister.” And Quarmby hurried out.

“What the devil does the fellow want?” Tobi stood up and started to prowl about the office. “And the Nazabni Ulana Farlan is still in the city. Although, of course, she is no longer the nazabni.”

I felt extremely sorry for Ulana, although I’d been perhaps the chief architect in the decision to remove her from office. If only she could get over her infatuation with Yavnin Purvun she could get on with her life. There was much for her to accomplish in Vallia.

“I agree, it must be very galling for Ulana. Nath Swantram is not your most delicate kind of fellow.”

Now Ochs are not tall diffs. Quarmby appeared in the doorway and opened his mouth about to shout the introduction. He went flying forward and sideways as the chief pallan strode impatiently in giving the little Och a push quite out of proportion to the need. The glitter of steel filled the passage beyond his bustling figure.

Tobi stopped pacing instantly, and swung around to stare at the chief pallan. His color was up. The scar disfiguring the left side of his face, slashed across nose and mouth, stood out vividly.
Nath Swantram did not much care for his obvious nickname, Nath the Clis.

He marched up to the desk with a kind of swagger ill-suited to a quiet office. A rectangle of yellow paper between his fingers slapped down on the desk. He stood back a pace and glared at me with obvious gleeful enjoyment. For a moment complete silence reigned.

All manner of appropriate—or inappropriate—remarks rushed through my head. I looked up. “What, Swantram? No Lahal?”

He made a curt gesture. “The matter is serious. This is the warrant for your arrest.”

I did not touch the yellow paper. “On what charge?”

He put a finger to his scar. Despite all his swagger he was ill at ease. “You are no longer the Emperor of Vallia. You must bow to the Law as anyone else.”

In my old gravel-shifting voice I fairly snarled out: “Get on with it, man!”

He jumped.

Tobi spoke in a voice not quite as steady as he would have wished. “You can’t arrest Dray Prescot! He is the Emperor of Emperors, the Emperor of All Paz!”

“Best keep your mouth closed, cramph,” said Nath the Clis without turning his head to look at Tobi. He drew himself up. He opened his mouth to carry on talking and I cut in harshly.

“And best you keep a civil tongue in your head, Swantram!”

He didn’t like that. Still, having got this far he intended to carry on this farce to the end.

“You ask what the charge is. I shall tell you.” Now he was really enjoying this. He pointed a finger at me.
“You are under arrest and charged with the murder of Tyr Larghos Fernleigh, my chief secretary.”
That's the end of the sample. Thank you for reading. If you would like to find out what happens next, you can buy the complete Mushroom eBook edition from the usual online bookshops or through www.mushroom-ebooks.com.

For more information about Mushroom Publishing, please visit us at www.mushroompublishing.com.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Burt Akers was a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer, who died in December 2005 aged eighty-four.

Bulmer wrote over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction, both under his real name and numerous pseudonyms, including Alan Burt Akers, Frank Brandon, Rupert Clinton, Ernest Corley, Peter Green, Adam Hardy, Philip Kent, Bruno Krauss, Karl Maras, Manning Norvil, Chesman Scot, Nelson Sherwood, Richard Silver, H. Philip Stratford, and Tully Zetford. Kenneth Johns was a collective pseudonym used for a collaboration with author John Newman. Some of Bulmer’s works were published along with the works of other authors under “house names” (collective pseudonyms) such as Ken Blake (for a series of tie-ins with the 1970s television programme The Professionals), Arthur Frazier, Neil Langholm, Charles R. Pike, and Andrew Quiller.

Bulmer was also active in science fiction fandom, and in the 1970s he edited nine issues of the New Writings in Science Fiction anthology series in succession to John Carnell, who originated the series.
THE DRAY PRESCOT SERIES

The Delian Cycle
1. Transit to Scorpio
2. The Suns of Scorpio
3. Warrior of Scorpio
4. Swordships of Scorpio
5. Prince of Scorpio

The Havilfar Cycle
6. Manhounds of Antares
7. Arena of Antares
8. Fliers of Antares
9. Bladesman of Antares
10. Avenger of Antares
11. Armada of Antares

The Krozair Cycle
12. The Tides of Kregen
13. Renegade of Kregen
14. Krozair of Kregen

The Vallian Cycle
15. Secret Scorpio
16. Savage Scorpio
17. Captive Scorpio
18. Golden Scorpio
The Balintol Cycle
44. Intrigue of Antares
45. Gangs of Antares
46. Demons of Antares
47. Scourge of Antares
48. Challenge of Antares
49. Wrath of Antares

The Spectre Cycle
50. Shadows over Kregen
51. Murder on Kregen
52. Turmoil on Kregen